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Entitles: Booker T. Washington's Signs of Play

by Susanna Ashton

"The first thing that came in my way of book learning was the number 18," wrote Booker T. Washington in his memoir *Up From Slavery*. He goes on to explain that in the darkness of the salt furnaces where he and his stepfather worked, the boss would go around and mark each barrel with an identifying number. Washington's stepfather was always "18," and Washington recalls that "after a while I got to the point where I could make that figure, though I knew nothing about any other figures or letters" (18). While Washington spends much time extolling his own hard work in mastering book learning in his later years, the ambiguity of his initial phrasing is telling—that something "came in my way." The phrasing opens up the interpretative possibilities that this essay seeks to explore—by the way of *what* things did he encounter book learning? And, equally, how were those same things obstacles? A complex exchange of signification and power underlying the ambiguity of this phrase can be seen in Washington's memoir, especially in the scenes that illustrate the mastery of literacy. These scenes use troubled terms quite unlike the traditional equation of literacy and freedom common to antebellum slave narratives. Indeed, Washington's sense of "play" with the codes and sign systems used by white society seems barely congruent

Southern Literary Journal, volume xxxix, number 2, spring 2007

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with the portrait of the literal-minded and doggedly pragmatic leader he came to be known as in his adulthood.¹

“Play” is significant here for a number of reasons, but one aspect involves Washington’s composition of *Up From Slavery* itself. After reviewing the first few pages of what was to become *Up From Slavery*, Lyman Abbott, editor of *The Outlook* magazine (which was planning to publish the series of recollections), asked Washington specifically if he could add anecdotes about his play as a child: “I, for example, would like very much to know more of your boyhood life in the slave days, if it were possible for you to give it. Did you have any sports, any education, any work to do before emancipation?” (Abbott 159) With a polite but crushing assessment of the profound disconnect between the genteel northern literary professional and a man born into enslavement and desperate poverty, Booker T. Washington responded in *Up From Slavery* with the following:

I was asked not long ago to tell something about the sports and pastimes that I engaged in during my youth. Until that question was asked it had never occurred to me that there was no period of my life that was devoted to play. From the time that I can remember anything, almost every day of my life has been occupied in some kind of labour; though I think I would now be a more useful man if I had had time for sports. (9)

Washington’s sense of play was redefined in his own terms. As he went on to explain, instead of “play,” his childhood was spent in terrified service, often delivering corn to a local mill, all the while fearing both the dark and lonely road and punishment for a late return.² “Play” wasn’t merely absent; it was replaced with labor and terror. Washington’s notion of play was inflected by a sense that while meanings and words might be culturally translatable, they weren’t necessarily fixed. In retrospect, Washington seems uncertain of how precisely such cultural translations ever came about. In this essay I consider Washington’s often reluctant, but sometimes wry and knowing, dismantling of various meaning systems to demonstrate how he was simultaneously constructed and sited by language.

Washington, with his famously stolid persona, nonetheless recognized the fragmented nature of the signifier. In his writings he continually reports or imagines disruptions of language as the defining moments of his life. Washington widens the activity of the signifier—not in a redemptively radical way concerned with redeeming or re-interpreting his political legacy. Rather, this analysis should demonstrate that his political actions and life activities were an outgrowth of a deep and canny skepticism he

had for language systems. And that skepticism was shaped by the ways in which such systems accurately or inaccurately represented what he saw as the experiences of his life. By examining closely the ways in which he represented his encounters with signs in the form of his earliest texts—names, middle initials, numbers on the face of a clock, the syllables of *Webster's* spelling book, and workmen's numbers in the dark salt and coal mines—we can then also approach his representations of his own orality and his own complex publication history with an eye to better understanding the fraught nature of what was at stake in being a prominent African American implicated so contestedly in the world of books.³

Up From Slavery

Booker T. Washington may now be historically understood as one of the most divisive leaders of race relations in American history, but during the bulk of his lifetime, his leadership was so successful in dominating national discourse that dissenters had difficulty in making their alternative views of Washington known. During his lifetime, he was able to suppress much dissent because his powerful influence allowed him astute and truly effective manipulations of print culture. Not only did he publish a goodly number of books and not only was his autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, translated into 18 languages, but he also maintained close formal and informal relationships with various newspaper and periodical editors, ensuring that the press he received was almost always fawning or egregiously favorable (Mugleston).

For much of the twentieth century, Washington's life story may have been one of the best-known narratives of the African American experience, thanks to the widespread success of his various memoirs, but a brief recap of his pertinent biography is nonetheless useful here. Although he was never certain of his birthdate, he was likely born in 1856 on a small farm near Hale's Ford, Virginia. His mother, Jane Ferguson, was a slave, and his father was an unknown white man. A couple of years after his birth, his mother married a neighboring slave, Washington or "Wash," who became known to Booker as his stepfather. When, immediately after the Civil War, "Wash" got a job in the salt furnaces of Kanawha Salines in West Virginia, Jane and her three children traveled to join him. For Booker, the next few years of his childhood were marked by periods as a domestic servant to local families, interrupted by stints of hard labor in the salt mines and farm labor at home, all the while attending school whenever he could.

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In one of his happier childhood memories, Washington recounts taking a small wooden box, knocking out a side, putting some shelves in it, and filling the shelves with “every kind of book that I could get my hands upon, and calling it my ‘library’” (Washington *Up From Slavery* 25). Washington’s use of offsetting quotation marks calls attention to his awareness of childish aggrandizement here. It also foregrounds his career as a library builder—both Tuskegee’s and many others that he formally or informally sponsored across the country. His influence with Andrew Carnegie was to become well known, and Washington’s extant correspondence contains regular appeals from individuals and institutions seeking his help in garnering Carnegie library funds.⁴ His small wooden “library,” in its offset quotes, however, indicates both on one hand a bemused adult who knows how much more that weighty word should indicate, and also a child who grasps the bourgeois respectability of a library, even if he knows little or cares little about the specific contents. This analysis may not be entirely fair to a man who spoke often and at length about the values of reading and intellectual exploration, but it illustrates nonetheless an invocation of the term “library,” which should have been especially alien to an uneducated emancipated child, in a manner full of semiotic richness.⁵

Thanks in part to the encouragement he had from his mother and his community, once Washington became a teenager he was able to travel to the Hampton School in the Tidewater region of Virginia, a school primarily for industrial/agricultural training of young African American students. With no money, he had little hope of being enrolled in the school, but he managed to impress the faculty and administrators there with his industriousness and diligence. As a result, he was awarded a janitorial job that enabled him to work his way through school. After graduating from Hampton he began teaching at small impoverished schools near his family in West Virginia. His success there as teacher and community leader was remarkable: he sent students on to success at Hampton; he established social clubs, debating teams, and even a local reading room; and he so ingratiated himself with the local white leadership that they sent him lecturing throughout the state to lobby for the black vote in establishing Charleston as the state capital. By 1881, when a letter arrived at Hampton from a state commissioner for Negro schools in Alabama asking for a recommendation for a man to lead up a new school initiative, Booker T. Washington received the nod. He accepted this mission, packed for Alabama and began the achievement with which he was forever credited—the founding of what was to become Tuskegee University (51–53).

Tuskegee was initiated as a brokered deal between an influential black businessman and white politicians. In exchange for the black vote on various issues, the state of Alabama agreed to help fund a new school for black students (Harlan 113–116). This history is important because it sets the pattern for the dealings that Washington negotiated all his life in his encounters with influential white power brokers. Through his tireless fundraising and boosting, Tuskegee grew in national prominence as an industrial school that would train young men for artisanal careers (carpenters, brick makers, tinsmiths) as well as for farming. Women were, to a much lesser extent, also trained for agricultural, artisanal, and industrial careers. The emphasis of their education was usually more focused upon educated approaches to household management and domestic science. Tuskegee quickly grew to surpass Hampton in size, scope, and national prominence—a fact particularly notable because, despite its white patronage, Tuskegee was led by black administrators and faculty. Academic subjects were taught alongside the more applied topics and the faculty for those classes (mathematics, history, etc.) was largely staffed by graduates of traditional liberal arts schools such as Fisk University; nonetheless, the overwhelming focus of the Tuskegee education during Washington's reign was upon agricultural and industrial training, with an additional push to train teachers for rural black schools (Mugleston).

As the prominence of Tuskegee grew, so did the role of Booker T. Washington: first as a spokesman for black educators, then as a spokesman for all black Americans. With his celebrated speech to a largely white audience at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895 in which (depending upon one's interpretation) he either sold out the civil rights of black Americans or made a proud and peacefully pragmatic speech in support of future cooperation, he became a national figure. In it, he famously proclaimed: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." Whether brilliantly pragmatic, conservatively heartfelt, or hypocritically betraying black Americans, his speech was, as his biographer Louis Harlan put it, "timely"; it was precisely what white America, at least, wanted to hear (Harlan 204). Frederick Douglass had died earlier that year, and in large part thanks to his Atlanta Exposition speech, Washington came to be seen as an heir to the position of national black leadership.⁶ Invitations streamed in from prominent politicians, industrialists, and religious figures. President William McKinley visited Tuskegee in 1898. Washington dined with President Roosevelt, hobnobbed with millionaires, and even had tea with Queen Victoria.

Almost all major black political appointments at the national and state level during the Roosevelt and Taft administrations had to be “cleared” through him.⁷ He dominated the black media and, through direct and indirect influence that often infuriated his less influential opponents, Washington was incredibly successful in controlling the popular media’s presentations of his work and his persona. Although he was far from universally acclaimed, his accommodationism was certainly successful in advancing his own star (Mugleston).

Increasing opposition from many college-educated “race leaders” such as Monroe Trotter and W. E. B. Du Bois became more challenging with their founding of the Niagara Movement and then the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization that shared many of Washington’s goals but with which he never chose to associate himself.⁸ He died in 1915, lecturing and fundraising for Tuskegee until the very end. His biographers have revealed that despite his life-long public enmity with the rising power that became the NAACP, he gave extensive and secret support for many years to financially and logistically assist anti-segregation legal cases and other progressive causes. His double life was never popularly known during his lifetime but it renders his legacy as a reader of signs considerably more complex.

Initial Possessions

In order to understand how Washington’s sense of sign systems was informed by both an acceptance and a denial of his own culturally marginal position, it is useful to look at a couple of pivotal incidents from his memoirs. Washington’s depiction of how he became fluent in the languages of a dominant class from a culturally marginal place in society offers his readers an opportunity to understand “the dismantled character of language” because it emerges from his own conflicted sense of his position (Wardrop 649). Washington is reluctant to acknowledge that his marginal place in society was not overcome by his career successes. This unease manifests itself in ambivalent attitudes toward agency and interpretation.

As many scholars have noted, Washington did indeed alter his public and private persona depending upon his audience. Houston Baker argues, for example, that Washington’s behavior with his white patrons was essentially fawningly minstrel-like while his own autocratic management of Tuskegee and black national politics was more akin to the

role of the white plantation owner demanding absolute order and obedience (73–74). Washington thus held onto his leadership position in the black community only by denying his mainstream marginality as a token black man for the white power brokers. Therefore, while Wardrop examines Douglass' appropriation of language on his own hard-fought terms, we can take a similar approach with Washington to see that his appropriation of language and similar dismantling of language systems often came with a psychic price. For Washington, the dismantling of the textual world was inevitable and occasionally even pleasurable. On the other hand, it could also be self-defeating and disruptive of his careful public self. Washington's persona and career were hinged on an orderly correlation between meaning and representation. And yet his depictions of his own experiences, whether conscious or not, reveal a more skeptical assessment of the rationalized world of meanings.

Let us look first at his very identity by examining his depictions of how to assign names. Booker T. Washington's interest in names went beyond his own ability to "name" black leaders to national political appointments at the height of his political influence. His own name, memorable and dignified though it may have been, was a curiously created artifice. As in many slave autobiographies, his initial narrative focuses upon themes of ignorance and knowledge. While in some ways he denies much knowledge about his "true" name, he nonetheless reveals a great deal of knowledge on the subject of naming itself. Indeed, in *Up From Slavery*, he tells a proud story of a man who literally and figuratively got a name for himself.

The name "Booker" he remembers as having simply been what he had always been called. Harlan speculates that he might have been named after Bowker Preston, a white farmer with some nearby property and who might well have fathered this slave child. A farm inventory noted the presence of a "negro boy," "Bowker" which was then crossed out and replaced with "Booker" (10). Whatever that may or may not imply, the significance of Booker's name lies not in its origins or even its ironies. Rather, the significance of his name here is in its self-constructedness and his fully conscious realization of its both determinate and indeterminate connection to who he was.

His middle and last name were similarly contradictory, in that they were strangely spurious and crafted at the same time. In *Up From Slavery*, Washington writes:

Before going to school it had never occurred to me that it was needful or appropriate to have an additional name. When I heard the school-roll called, I noticed that all of the children had at least two names, and some of them indulged in what seemed to me the extravagance of having three. I was in deep perplexity, because I knew that the teacher would demand of me at least two names, and I had only one. By the time the occasion came for the enrolling of my name, an idea occurred to me which I thought would make me equal to the situation; and so, when the teacher asked me what my full name was, I calmly told him "Booker Washington," as if I had been called by that name all my life; and by that name I have since been known. (21)

Of course, the appropriation of both his stepfather's first name and the name of the first American president was hardly random. He had a troubled relationship with his stepfather, who seems to have seen young Booker chiefly as supplementary income, and despite what many termed Booker's later accommodationism or conservatism, it is certainly possible to read his early appropriation of George Washington's and "Wash's" names as both adulatory and ironic.⁹ Booker's narrative of how his middle name (and thus his crucially placed initial "T") came into being, however, is the most telling anecdote of all:

Later in my life I found that my mother had given me the name of "Booker Taliaferro" soon after I was born, but *in some way* [emphasis added] that part of my name seemed to disappear and for a long time was forgotten, but as soon as I found out about it I revived it, and made my full name "Booker Taliaferro Washington." I think there are not many men in our country who have had the privilege of naming themselves in the way that I have. (21)

What's notable here is the passive disappearance of the name. It was lost through no malice or amnesia, but simply "in some way"—a recurring motif for Washington, a man we normally associate with definitive control. Moreover, the shifting nature of names is underscored; they float in, they float out. While he couches his tale with the wry observation that he may be one of the few men in the country to boast of such nomenclature, he is effectively stating his outsider status as a slave—as the ultimate self-made man in the American tradition, to be sure. His narrative of self-naming reveals a willingness to portray himself as both skeptical of, and yet willing to exploit, mainstream systems of signification.

Perhaps the disappearance of the Taliaferro name should not have been a surprise, for Washington indicates that his mother too may have had a sense of play, or in this case, “fancy” when it came to nomenclature. While Taliaferro was not an unknown name in Virginia at the time and there were several prominent white families that held this name throughout the South, Harlan is hesitant to attribute any specific Taliaferro family as being connected to Washington or his mother. Harlan quotes Washington’s claim, made during a *St. Paul Dispatch* interview, that “Taliaferro” was chosen by his mother, “but that was not her name only her fancy” (qtd in Harlan 4). Despite its lack of known historical lineage, or perhaps precisely because of its origins in the world of “fancy,” he reclaimed it as a middle name. He used “Booker Taliaferro Washington” in its entirety from time to time but his middle name came to be known most commonly by the “T” itself, as in the familiar usage of “Booker T.”—often without his last name at all. This may have been brought on by the fact that he signed his name almost always with his middle initial, but it also came to imply other associations.¹⁰ This invocation, whether initiated to belittle him or out of a fond familiarity, came to signal a shorthand for conservative politics, self-help, and the entire set of associations commonly connected to Washington’s life and work. He had invented or discovered a middle name and initial that hinted at a family lineage—at least a family with the presumed generational continuity to know of multiple names that might be used. To his detractors, appropriation of a middle name may have seemed somewhat presumptuous and part of a campaign to impress upon others a false family lineage, although his openness about the drifting and agentless manner in which he obtained those names would contradict that reading. Whether his middle initial was understood as denying his slave heritage or not, “Booker T.” became a watchword for far more than just the man. The implications of his usage of this defining letter “T,” however, suggest perhaps our most problematic example of how a particular sign worked on the one hand to bolster up his performative mastery of language and signs. It signaled, as we shall see below, a self-possession and an entitlement that was widely recognized and yet particular to the African American experience. On the other hand, the tense affiliation with a capitalized middle initial also displayed his cultural marginalization.

Just as a name positions an individual in society at large and also implicitly within a language structure, so we can see that Washington is positioned by his many names. Frederick Douglass and many other runaway slaves discussed their fake and appropriated names as part of linguistic

slippage but also as part of their subterfuge and necessary double identities as fugitives during the antebellum period. For Washington, raised in the transitional era of slave to freeman, the vicissitudes of language are supposedly going to be under his control; thus he tells the story of his own naming with a powerful assertion of mastery. He not only doesn't change his name, but he emphatically positions it as his created "core" identity. By presenting his solid narrative of naming, he performs a faith in the centrality of how he relates to the language system he is in. And yet the more he emphasizes the full and dignified nature of his name, the more too he underscores how its construction was both as determined *and* as random as any more traditionally given name would have been.

Washington's propensity for self-naming is revealed in one of the most curious and compelling moments in *Up From Slavery*. In this section, Washington tells a familiar but slightly questionable story about the cultural practices of self-naming after Emancipation. Again, note how it opens with a vague passivity and deflection from agency: "*In some way* [emphasis added] a feeling got among the coloured people that it was far from proper for them to bear the surname of their former owners, and a great many of them took other surnames. This was one of the first signs of freedom" (16). Thus a feeling that was beyond anyone's control led to engagement with a new system of locating identity in the world. Washington then continues to explain:

When they were slaves, a coloured person was simply called "John" or "Susan." There was seldom occasion for more than the use of the one name. If "John" or "Susan" belonged to a white man by the name of "Hatcher," sometimes he was called "John Hatcher," or "Hatcher's John." But there was a feeling that "John Hatcher" or "Hatcher's John" was not the proper title by which to denote a freeman; and so in many cases "John Hatcher" was changed to "John S. Lincoln" or "John S. Sherman," the initial "S" standing for no name, it being simply a part of what the coloured man proudly called his "entitles." (16)

This paragraph is key to understanding not only how Washington saw reconfigurations of signifying systems, but also to understanding what was at stake in such reconfigurations. Here the possessive S (from "Hatcher's") is appropriated and reconfigured to indicate self-possession. It is a key part of the "entitles." And yet this action frees the "S" from its alphabetic moorings. The "S" has no direct referential chain of signifying as a "normal" middle initial might. Rather, a relic of its syntactical

import is all that remains. The grammatical function of the possessive, apart from any initializing or onomastic function, is saved. Washington's story of the rescue of the possessive "S" demonstrates well how he was acutely aware of a level of play that was his to configure.¹¹

Washington's interest or belief in the story demonstrates his fascination with naming and the vexed relationship such a cultural practice might have with a dominant culture's systems of both nomenclature and signifying systems. This belief becomes clearer in other reflections when Washington recounts how students in his early classes gave themselves initials:

In registering the names of the students, I found that almost every one of them had one or more middle initials. When I asked what the "J" stood for, in the name of John J. Jones, it was explained to me that this was part of his "entitles." Most of the students wanted to get an education because they thought it would enable them to earn more money as school-teachers. (58)

Here, an initials story is no longer framed as one of proud self-possession. Quite the contrary. The tone of this passage indicates the misuse of initials by John Jones. As Washington presents it, Jones' initials are connected to a misplaced sense of entitlement, a sense later to manifest itself when Jones indicates his wish to be a teacher. In our first instance of the "S," the unmooring of the language system used to demonstrate self-possession was charming and productive but this case was quite different. In this case, the "J" is simply a false or, perhaps, playful use of a sign. As Washington sees it, it points to a name that is unearned and non-existent. The possessive "S," by being an empty signifier, marked pride and playfulness, inasmuch as its emptiness could mark anything. The "J" was still tied to a formal sign system without having earned its right to recognition. The "J" was a letter leading to a destructive sense of entitlement while the S could pass as an empty receptacle at worst or at best indicate self-possession. A sense of entitlement thus means, literally and figuratively, a contested sense of self-worth, manifest in an inappropriate sense of semiotic mastery. This complicated distinction makes sense when it is put into the larger context of Washington's marginalization. Learning and then teaching a language system from those margins demand a very particular and heightened sense of the inadequacy of representational systems.

Webster's Meaningless Words

Of course, Washington's fraught sense of reading and assigning meaning to initials and letters also seems a logical outgrowth of his earliest textual encounters. After the number 18 had "come in his way," Washington's next serious encounter with book-learning was with *Webster's Speller*. As he tells it:

I induced my mother to get hold of a book for me. *How or where* [emphasis added] she got it I do not know, but *in some way* [emphasis added] she procured an old copy of Webster's "blue-back" spelling book, which contained the alphabet, followed by such meaningless words as "ab," "ba," "ca," "da." I began at once to devour this book, and I think that it was the first one I ever had in my hands. I had learned *from somebody* [emphasis added] that the way to begin to read was to learn the alphabet, so I tried in all the ways I could think of to learn it,—all of course without a teacher, for I could find no one to teach me. At that time there was not a single member of my race anywhere near us who could read, and I was too timid to approach any of the white people. *In some way*, [emphasis added] within a few weeks, I mastered the greater portion of the alphabet. (18)

On one hand this anecdote deserves note because it again demonstrates an emphatic vagueness about "how or where" his mother got the book and, even more notably, that although he cannot point to the precise way in which syllables transformed themselves into the alphabet (an intriguing chronology of learning—wouldn't one expect to recognize the alphabet before mastering syllables?) he knows that "in some way" he had mastered the alphabet. The learning process and the mechanisms that made those syllables begin to make sense for him are beyond grasp, beyond memory, and beyond reason. Things simply happened "in some way."

On the other hand, we can see from this curious description how the lessons of *Webster's* were absorbed by young Washington's mind. Since Washington was born (most likely) in 1856 and would probably have been about nine years old at the time his family migrated to West Virginia, and since one could probably also assume that any spelling book his mother obtained for him would be at least a few years old, it seems logical to suggest his spelling text was *Webster's* 1857 version or a version very close to it.¹² If this were the case, it is useful to briefly consider how the small "blue-back" speller might have offered him critical tools for both reading

books) promoted lessons which it is easy to imagine Washington absorbing (whether critically or unquestioningly, we cannot know).¹³

Webster's introduction to the 1857 version, generally reproduced in editions throughout the nineteenth century, noted that children might learn words as pure and meaningless signs:

It is useful to teach children the significations of words, as soon as they can comprehend them; but the understanding can hardly keep pace with the memory, and the minds of children may well be employed in learning to spell and pronounce words, whose signification is not within the reach of their capacities; for what they do not clearly understand at first, they will understand as their capacities are enlarged. (7)

Thus while it is easy to go through *Webster's* spelling book and note sample sentences which might well have been read skeptically, if not ironically, by a boy only recently freed from legal enslavement and still essentially living under wage slavery—"I do as I am bid," "Pay the laborer his wages when he has done his work," "Men acquire property by industry and economy, but it is more easy to acquire property than to keep it," "All mankind are brethren, descendants of common parents," "The path of duty is the path of safety," (12, 75, 78, 115)—it is crucial for this study to note the stress *Webster's* puts on reading for reading's sake alone. Comprehension wasn't necessary. The book promotes mastery of syllables and spelling as tools for comprehension to be sure, but also as having value simply for existing. Some words are defined by the sample sentences that follow each section, but most are not. And yet even the word lists might well have intrigued Washington. With his interest in the slippery nature of words, it is easy to imagine him drawn to the long list of homonyms listed at the end of the book (e.g. "wrest"/"rest").

And perhaps interpreting those signs wasn't that important. Of course, the slippery nature of words as presented in the *Speller* might not have been surprising to enslaved people all too well-versed in the vagaries of how literacy might or might not be relevant to their lives. Indeed, the presence of words and books might have had value as much as the standardized interpretation of them might have had. There are accounts, for instance, of spellers being used interchangeably with Bibles. According to Janet Duitsman Cornelius, "Slaves recalled black preachers who preached out of blue-back spellers and conducted marriages using the speller as their guide" (93). It is possible these services were conducted from com-

piling the sample sentences which were scattered throughout the book, but it is also likely the book was invoked without any recourse to reading it at all. Its presence and significance went far beyond the mechanical offerings of the text.

Finally, in most editions of *Webster's*, although I still refer to the 1857 edition here, there were honorific recitations to George Washington scattered throughout the sample sentences—most famously “Washington was not a selfish man. He labored for the good of his country more than for himself” (50). It is certainly tempting to speculate upon young Booker being drawn to such public homage with no irony whatsoever. The overall significance of *Webster's* texts, though, is to recall that this wasn't Booker T. Washington's first entry into the play of signifiers but it was part of a chain of experiences he presented with subtle commentary. The more precise the accounts of his encounters were, the more he had to attribute the interpretation of them to wonder, mystery, and drift.

Timing

Washington's allegiance to the world of “facts” was often an awkward performance that belied his intentions. He pronounced his love for newspapers and admitted that he had to force himself to read novels. His favorite books were invariably biographies. “I like to be sure that I am reading about a real man or a real thing,” he wrote (*Up From Slavery* 121).

So what was “real” to Washington? He speaks repeatedly about how he wishes study were more focused upon the lives of men like his revered General Armstrong. “Instead of studying books so constantly, how I wish that our schools and colleges might learn to study men and things!” (30). But the men and things to which he refers rarely demonstrate a grounded reality. The more he emphasizes his fascination with the real and what he calls “facts,” the more desperate an effort it seems to be. His framing of the following story is of especial note because it highlights a frantic and self-conscious allegiance to the world of facts that undercuts his point. In one of his most famous tales, he begins by stating that as a youth, “I yielded to a temptation for which most people, I suppose, will condemn me but since it is a fact, I might as well state it. I have great faith in the power and influence of facts. It is seldom that anything is permanently gained from holding back a fact” (20).

That being said, Washington tells of how he wanted to attend school

so desperately that, although his stepfather wanted him to work many hours in the salt-furnaces, a compromise was found wherein he might work for several hours early in the morning, leave at 9 for school and then return later in the day for more work. This plan was made more complicated by the fact that although he was let off at 9, school was some ways off and it, too, started at 9. He writes: "I got the idea that the way for me to reach school on time was to move the clock hands from half-past eight up to the nine o'clock mark" (20). Booker's ploy was eventually found out and the practice ceased but, as we've seen before, his rendition of the incident is telling in a number of ways. To begin with it, he most obviously walks us through his own manipulation and yet ultimate subservience to the mechanistic signs on the clock. More important, though, is how the tale demonstrates a performativity of factual allegiance supposedly at the center of the social order. On the other hand, his desperate performance of the tale reveals another invocation of vagueness and imprecision juxtaposed with incidents of great precision and definitiveness to curious effect.

For the fact is that he denies the "facts" of the clock. He asserts his own integrity by confessing his lies. He performs his signature honesty for his audience in revealing his boyish scheme. But he also reveals a completely unpersuasive allegiance to facts. If he had believed in facts, he wouldn't have altered the time at all because it would have been a fixed truth—consider his repeated invocations to facts, truths, and fixed realities. The more he calls attention to this desperate faith in what he believed to be facts, the more he effectively throws them into a curious and vulnerable relief—continuously contradicted by his own experiences with the slippage of sign systems and the world.

Indeed, nowhere in his text is the problem of meaning as both difference and deferral as clearly played out as in his two anecdotes about comparative calibrations of time.¹⁴ Washington recounts a tale to demonstrate his plucky determination to get an education. Yet it also demonstrates the vexed nature of a marginalized reader to a supposedly standardized and core text—that of the clock.

Houston Baker has argued that this clock incident effectively took Washington out of the spatial and temporal geography of the South, a necessary move for asserting black male identity in the South. Baker writes that Washington had to "alter the very time in which he exists" (44). This analysis is helpful to the line of thought we are pursuing here too, for it reminds us that the drift Washington senses pulls him away

from the solid world of fact. Washington's clock is a good example of how difficult it is to function alongside an inevitable deferment of meaning. Any subject needs to function within a world of perpetually displaced meaning; for a man such as Washington, who is profoundly marginalized, relating to the world of language's power relations would have stakes with especially complex implications. His personal 9 a.m. and the 9 a.m. of the official clock had a fractured correspondence, at best. Washington here is the very embodiment of a willed *différance*. On one hand he uses his story to show how he lied and faked facts—but his story nonetheless demonstrates a powerful and permanent disruption of the archetypal industrial measure of labor.

Signed Editions

The calibrations of the alphanumerical systems parallel the textual calibrations which marked the various incarnations of Washington's life stories. Roger J. Bresnahan and Antonio T. Bly have both closely examined the differences between Washington's two major versions of his life story, *The Story of My Life and Work* (1900) and *Up From Slavery* (1901) and concluded that there were essentially two different audiences imagined to respond to each work: a largely black readership in the South for *The Story of My Life and Work* and a much more affluent, largely white readership for *Up From Slavery*. This difference in audience can be ascertained both from the internal narrative construction and also from the publication history of Washington's works. Here this history merits a brief recounting for what it reveals about Washington's notions of authorship, audience, and the slippery nature of printed words.

To begin, Washington wrote both versions of his life story with the assistance of what biographers have variously termed called a "ghost writer" or a "slave" (Harlan 243; Cox 230). *The Story of My Life and Work* was largely written by Edgar Webber, a black journalist, and published by J. L. Nichols & Company, which specialized in selling subscription book orders to a black reading audience. While scholars have attributed the sloppy nature of the book (it was filled with so many errors that Washington fired Webber and later refused to have his photograph printed in subsequent editions) simply upon the lack of supervision Webber received, it also may have had something to do with the fact that it was a subscription text. Because it would be sold by speculative subscriptions before it had had any reviews or could be inspected by the subscriber, the

quality of the finished book was not terribly relevant to sales. It would have been the reputation of Washington himself that would have moved his book into the hands of his black audience.

Whatever the cause for the sloppy text, it is notable that he still used an assistant for his second major iteration—*Up From Slavery*, written this time with the assistance of a white writer, Max Thrasher.¹⁵ In this case, there are different historical interpretations about just how closely involved Washington was in the production of the book, but his comfort level with using other writers in producing his story is useful to remind us of his curious sense of ephemeral responsibility. Despite his reputation and emphatic promotion of responsibility and accountability, his continual emphasis upon ungrounded, unfixed, and ephemeral action (“There was a feeling . . .,” “in some way,” “in some fashion”) reminds us of his considerable comfort in delegation. He was certainly the overseer of his own work and most Washington scholars are fairly comfortable in asserting that, as W. Fitzhugh Brundage put it, “Although *Up From Slavery* clearly reflected the labors of Thrasher, it unquestionably expressed Washington’s sentiments and ideas in his own language” (7). This assertion is well supported by the drafts of Washington’s manuscripts for *Up From Slavery*. Nonetheless, his reliance upon ghostwriters’ versions of his experiences suggests a belief that immediate experience is irrelevant in conveying knowledge. Imagination may have been more important to Washington than he admitted. Further, it also works in conjunction with his willingness to revise and revisit his life—as he did in part even in his third major work, *My Larger Education* (1911). His memories were changeable, his stories ever alterable. Not only were anecdotes recounted differently in various printed incarnations, he was famous for sprinkling his speeches with the same stories again and again, varying them whenever it served him to do so. Now, that isn’t remarkable, but in Washington’s case, where the stakes for seeming fixed, grounded, unalterable, and irrefutably truthful were so great, the fact that he was willing to turn over, reconsider, reshape, and revisit moments in such a self-conscious manner suggests that he was especially aware not only of the fragmentary nature of memory, but also of the inadequate methods we have to represent it. Another way we can understand his use of ghostwriters is to understand how it gave him leave to distance himself from the text. It was yet another way in which he effectively challenged the dominance of a language system. In this case, his distant authorship of the text means that he was distant from the fact that it needed to be written at all. After all, as an icon

of modest self-restraint, he had to walk a thin line between boasting and publicizing his exemplary life.

Distancing himself from his own text manifested itself in other ways as well. For example, one of the fundamental components of his autobiographies is the presence of excerpts, often lengthy, or complete transcripts of his and other people's speeches. Dominating his story, therefore, is the world's orality and its uneasy relationship with textual representation. Not only does he include speeches in his memoirs (and by using "he," I refer to the choices made by Washington and with Thrasher or Webber respectively), but he even included in *Up From Slavery* a chapter titled "The Secret of Success in Public Speaking." The relentless highlighting of the value of speech-making over writing, of presence over absence, pushed a workable, albeit contradictory hermeneutic—he wrote, but wasn't a writer.

I see the continual tweaking of Washington's life as part of his attempt to be free from the fixedness of textual representation as defined by the very power centers he was supposedly courting. In *Up From Slavery*, he remarks: "When I have an address to deliver, I like to forget all about the rules for proper use of the English Language, and all about rhetoric and that sort of thing, and I like to make the audience forget all about these things, too" (111). While initially it appears that this is a humble gesture of a plainspoken man who happily mangles formal rules in the pursuit of clear meaning, we cannot forget that this observation appears in the printed text of a meticulously edited and overseen ghost-written memoir. He performs in print a disregard for the rules of language when they are ephemerally oral, but bows to their power when printed. Surely the circularity of this reasoning suggests, again, a sense of himself as constructed by a dismantled language—one with contradictory rules he can only gesture at mastering. Not the rules of grammar and spelling, mind you, but the rules about language having a supposed correlation with reality.

Washington's fascination with signs is almost despite his better judgment. In his textual presentation of an adult self, he resists his own marginality, but it emerges time and time again. His refusal to see his perpetual marginalization within a white logocentric world of power inflects all his renditions of encounters with signs. As he proclaimed in the interview about his childhood, he doesn't know play. And yet, he cannot seem to pull back from it. His dogged determination to enter a master class by disavowing the instability at its core is constantly undermined by his own contradictory realization that, much as a clock's hands can be turned,

names can be altered, initials can reflect alternative notions of entitlement, and the number 18 can point only to his stepfather, his perpetual marginality will not allow him full access to a stable core. And yet it also allows him to see, however reluctantly, that the center in which he has invested so much cannot hold.

For a man seemingly grounded in the world of facts, the world of materiality, and above all the world of pragmatic anti-intellectualism, Washington was surprisingly drawn to a world of slippage, challenges, and a reluctant consciousness of the perpetual deferment of clarity. As his anecdote about the number 18 noted, book-learning “came in his way”—both as a hindrance and as a welcome development. We can see his mixed feelings about language and book learning as indicative of a career of challenge and skepticism towards the radical anti-accommodationism practiced by the lettered black men he saw as his enemies. But we can also close this study by recalling that the term was invoked by him without irony. Thus when book learning “came in his way,” it was indeed a stepping stone—not simply to professional success, but to stepping into the center of a system that was intent on marginalizing him, and, rather than revealing his new centrist position, it opened up to him an awareness of how the centrality of representation was an illusion.

NOTES

1. I use the word “pragmatic” here in its most grounded and least philosophical sense. Ross Posnock in *Color and Culture* similarly sees in Washington a pragmatist in vernacular terms although he gives Washington some credit as a forerunner of sorts to the modern black intellectual. Wilson J. Moses argues that Washington “vacillated between economic and ideological determinism” and actually provided some useful counterdoctrines to those of capitalism and the Protestant ethos as manifested primarily in conspicuous consumption (125–126). See Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Harvard UP, 1998); also Wilson J. Moses, “The Pragmatic Religion of Booker T. Washington.” In *Booker T. Washington and Black Progress: Up From Slavery 100 Years Later*. Edited by W. Fitzhugh Brundage. (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2003) 107–30.

2. Houston Baker’s essentially psychoanalytic study of Washington opens with a consideration of Baker’s own youthful fears of “The Blue Man”—a specter constructed by the southern black male imaginary. Whatever it is that Washington fears on those dark roads echoes strongly with the stalking presence of “the Blue Man” of Baker’s memory (1–12).

3. I wish to note here that Daneen Wardrop’s excellent study of Douglass’ sense of sign systems provided a rough blueprint around which this study of Washington has evolved.

4. Washington was especially active in soliciting funds for Fisk University's library, but his papers demonstrate his savvy rationing of influence among other sorts of institutions and organizations who sought libraries.

5. See his 1890 "Sunday Evening Talk" at Tuskegee as one such example. "There is to my mind a kind of sacredness of books," he declared (2). Booker T. Washington, "Reading a Means of Growth," given on Oct. 26, 1890. As recorded phonographically by M. Arnold Morin. *Tuskegee Student* 2 (Oct. 31, 1890): 1–2.

6. Washington discusses his own sense of the Douglass legacy at length in "The Intellectuals and the Boston Mob," in his book *My Larger Education*.

7. As described by Louis R. Harlan, many of the appointments made during the Roosevelt and Taft administrations were undone in a racist backlash during the Wilson administration, which saw the removal of most significant black office holders (405–410). See Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington. Volume 2: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901–1915*. (NY: Oxford UP, 1983).

8. A forerunner of the NAACP, the Niagara Movement was founded in 1905 specifically to oppose the accommodationist policies of Washington. With the increasing involvement of white liberals, the NAACP was formed in 1909 to subsume and extend the lobbying for civil and political rights.

9. Donald Gibson argues that Washington's invocation of the U.S. President as his inspiration was a later construct, for it doesn't appear in initial versions of his life story. Donald B. Gibson, "Strategies and Revisions of Self-Representation in Booker T. Washington's Autobiographies." *American Quarterly* 45.3 (September 1993): 370–393.

10. In his essay "Booker T. Washington's Strategies of Manliness for Black and White Audiences," David Leverenz asserts persuasively that "for most people who know about Booker T. Washington, the T. subliminally stands for 'Tom' (150). See David Leverenz, "Booker T. Washington's Strategies of Manliness for Black and White Audiences." In *Booker T. Washington and Black Progress: Up From Slavery 100 Years Later*. Edited by W. Fitzhugh Brundage. (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2003) 149–76. The T. is also asserted as an especially familiar catch phrase more often than not by people who are especially critical of his work, persona, and legacy. See, for example the title of Houston Baker's critique: *Turning South Again: Re-thinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T.*

11. Washington's anecdote may not be completely accurate—in searching I have found little that directly supports the truth of his story about the floating apostrophe S as signifying self-possession. While Herbert Gutman's masterful study of naming practices and kinship ties in *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* indicates a tradition of secret naming and deceptive naming, it doesn't address the notion of "entitles" and apostrophes. Joel Williamson notes how, in lieu of last names, a husband and a wife's names might be merged to identify an individual for a master's purposes, at least. Williamson found plantation records indicating that two Binahs on the same plantation were listed as "Nar's Binah" and "Ben's Binah." Williamson noted that the possessive could be occasionally

reversed for men as well and “Nat” was occasionally recorded as “Binah’s Nat.” (Williamson 309–310). John Inscœ has noted a connection between the adoption of middle initials, the creative appropriation of an apostrophe S and a creative reshaping of names. In comparing pre-Civil War slave lists with later records, Inscœ argues that many slaves with the most distinctively classical names, which indicated a specific slave nomenclature, sought to dignify them. Of those few who did retain names of this type, some sought to formalize them to reflect the dignity they felt their names should express and to disguise their origins. Thus as Romeo Jones became Romey O. Jones, a Pericles Smith called himself Perry Clees Smith, and a Polly’s Jim emerged as Mr. Appollos James (Inscœ 552–553). So, clearly, there was a generally understood mutability and flexibility of definitive naming, although the apostrophe as indicator of entitlement is not necessarily a wide-spread phenomenon. See Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750–1925* (NY: Pantheon Books 1976); Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction, 1861–1877* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1965); John C. Inscœ, “Carolina Slave Names: An Index to Acculturation.” *The Journal of Southern History* 49.4 (1983): 527–554.

12. The bibliographic history of *Webster’s* accounts for many derivative versions floating around, particularly during the wartime years when enforcement of copyright was lax and distribution was disrupted across the country, so what Washington refers to as *Webster’s* might have been an unauthorized version. But most versions appear to have kept quite close to the versions of *Webster’s* available in the 1840s and it would be consistent to assume that Washington encountered the bulk of an original *Webster’s* text even if he had ended up with a compromised or plagiarized edition (130–132). See Emily Ellsworth Ford Skeel, *A Bibliography of the Writings of Noah Webster, Compiled by Emily Ellsworth Ford Skeel*. Edited by Edwin H. Carpenter, Jr. (NY: The New York Public Library 1958).

13. For further information about freedmen’s textbooks, see Heather Andrea Williams’ excellent study, *Self-Taught* (126–137). See also Sharon Holt’s discussion of freed people and their independently established schools during this era (251–254). Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005); Sharon Ann Holt, “Making Freedom Pay: Freedpeople Working for Themselves, North Carolina 1865–1900.” *The Journal of Southern History*, 60.2 (May 1994): 229–262.

14. The notion of *différance* and deferral relies upon the distinction between signifier and signified. Derrida’s notion of *différance* is that it opens up a space that both reveals meaning and also the simultaneous and inevitable deferral of any fixed replacement for that space. See the key excerpt in Jacques Derrida, “Excerpt from ‘Différance.’” *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982): 3–27. *The Hydra*. 30 Apr 2004. 3 June 2006 <<http://www.hydra.umn.edu/derrida/diff.html>>.

15. While I concern myself here primarily with the two major versions of his life, see Donald Gibson's study (cited above) of the first two editions of *The Story of My Life and Work* as well as a comparison with *Up From Slavery* for a more comprehensive examination. Also see Antonio T. Bly's study of the ways in which Washington's famous metaphor of the separate fingers of the hand equating the separation of race is played out in his construction of audience in different sets of memoirs—especially in terms of subscription versus “regular” publication.

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